

## Working Definitions of Learning Difficulties

Bradford Metropolitan District Council - April 2020

### Introduction

A working group was set up to establish a district wide understanding of learning difficulties and appropriate teaching responses. The working group was made up of representatives from Local Authority services (Educational Psychology and Specialist teaching teams) and representatives from primary, secondary, special and post 16 provisions in the district. The working group met to agree definitions and appropriate strategies to meet needs. The information below provides a summary of the group's work.

### Learning Difficulties – Definitions

The group started from the point of acknowledging that using labels for learning difficulties can be both helpful and unhelpful at the same time. It can be helpful to the person, their family or those people who work with them to understand their needs and what support they might need. However, the categories can be unhelpful if the person is just seen as that label, for example 'profound learning difficulties'.

The working group agreed with the international definition in that there are three criteria, each of which are required to be met before a learning difficulty can be identified. These are: intellectual impairment, social or adaptive dysfunction and early onset. These are described further below.

The term 'specific' learning difficulties (e.g. dyslexia) is used in the UK to describe people who have difficulties in some domains but who do not have a significant general impairment in intelligence. They fall outside of scope of the definition of general learning difficulties.

### Intellectual Impairment

Within an educational context, intellectual impairment can be reflected in the young person's interaction with the curriculum in relation to their peers. In summary:

	Mild	Moderate LD	Severe LD	PMLD
End FS	<DJ Step 12 (36 months)	<DJ Step 11 (30 months)	<DJ Step 8 (20months)	<DJ Step 5 (9months)
End KS1	<Y1 ARE (72 months)	<PKSS4 (60months)	<PKSS2 (36 months)	<PKSS1 (24 months)
End KS2	<Y4 ARE	<Y2 ARE	<PKSS3	<PKSS1 (24 months)
End KS3	<Y6 ARE	<Y4 ARE	<PKSS4	<PKSS1 (24 months)
End KS4	<Y7 ARE	<Y5 ARE	<Y1ARE	<PKSS1 (24 months)
End KS5	<Entry Level2	<Entry Level3	<Entry Level 1	<PKSS1 (24 months)

IQ or other standardised assessments can sometimes be used to assess the presence and degree of learning difficulty, with standard scores of:

- 70 – 90 (>14<sup>th</sup> centile) **below age related expectations**
- 50 -70 (<2<sup>th</sup> centile) **moderate** learning difficulty
- 35 - 50 (<0.1st centile) **severe** learning difficulty
- Below 35 (>0.01 centile) **profound and multiple** learning difficulty

Assessing children and young people at the lower ends of the standardised range has inherent difficulties and should be viewed with caution and in combination with other data.

### **Social or adaptive dysfunction**

Alongside of an intellectual impairment, young people with a learning difficulty are likely to have some impairment of social functions including communication, eating and drinking, keeping safe, personal care and recognising risks. Whilst there are assessments which seek to capture and quantify this, within an educational context, this can also be evidenced based on experience of how the young person functions within the school environment.

### **Early Onset**

For the majority of individuals, the presence of a learning difficulty is from birth or during the early development period of life. Acquired learning difficulties can also occur as result of a brain injury or other trauma.

### **The Continuum of Learning Difficulties**

In an attempt to explain the wide range of different abilities the idea of a continuum of learning has been used.

**Mild learning difficulties (MiLD)** – A young person who is said to have a mild learning difficulties is usually able to hold a conversation, and communicate most of their needs and wishes. They may need some support to understand abstract or complex ideas and be delayed across the curriculum. Such young people are often independent in caring for themselves and doing many everyday tasks. They usually have some basic reading and writing skills. Young people with MiLD will usually have their needs met in a Mainstream setting, using resources normally available to the school.

**Moderate learning difficulties (MLD)** – Young people with moderate learning difficulties will have some language skills that mean they can communicate about their day to day needs and wishes. Young people with MLD will require a highly differentiated curriculum and some personalised learning. They may need some support with caring for themselves, but will be able to carry out day to day tasks with support. Young people with MLD will usually have their needs met in a Mainstream setting, using resources normally available to the school.

**Severe learning difficulties (SLD)** – Young people with a severe learning difficulties will usually use basic words and gestures to communicate their needs. They will need a high level of support in school requiring significant personalisation of the curriculum. They may be able to look after some if not all of their own personal care needs. Some young people will have additional medical needs and some need support with mobility issues. Young people with SLD will usually have an Education Health and Care Plan and will be educated in either a mainstream or specialist school environment.

**Profound and Multiple learning difficulties (PMLD)** – Young people with profound and multiple learning difficulties (PMLD), will have severely limited understanding and will have multiple disabilities, which can include impairments of vision, hearing and movement as well as other challenges such as epilepsy and autism. Young people in this group need support with mobility and may have complex health needs requiring extensive support. They will require a bespoke curriculum and will have considerable difficulty communicating. Young people with PMLD will usually have an Education Health and Care Plan and be educated in a specialist provision.

*Adapted from: British Institute of Learning Disabilities, Factsheet: Learning Disabilities, 2011*